## 3.16.2025 Sermon

## The Function of Repentance | Luke 15:11-19

## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

Repentance, fundamental truths, Bible, humility, Pharisee, tax collector, prodigal son, regret, function of repentance, God's example, national unity, stubbornness, arrogance, personal growth, community influence.

## **SPEAKERS**

Rev. James Bady

Let's pray for this service.

God, I thank you for this moment in time. I thank you for the word that will go forward. I thank you for these, your people, and that they are open to your heart and your message for them, even in this time. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, oh Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. Amen.

Amen.

So we're entering today into a new topic, still "The Gym," but a new topic within "The Gym" called repentance.

Pastor T last week kind of opened up this whole next phase, the fundamental truths of the Bible, of which repentance or repenting is one of them. And so, within that, I'm sure a lot of you, at some point in your time, if you've been around church at any given time, have heard this topic of repentance.

You know, it is very difficult to make this an encouraging message on this topic. I say that because I know from talking to some of you, or many of you, throughout the week that you're going through some challenging times in your life, and you really need encouragement. And so, here I am, putting another topic on top of your troubles called repentance.

But I mean it in terms of us analyzing ourselves and thinking about our influence in our lives and the communities around us. And I hope even embedded in that challenge is comfort. Even in the challenge, is there any comfort?

So we're talking about repentance, but not repentance generally. I want to focus on the function of repentance. What does it do? What does it show us?

Right? It has an essence to tell us about something. It does something. It isn't just, or is it just, a religious, biblical exercise of us coming and repenting to God and transforming from a life of whatever to now I'm following God?

Is it a one-time exercise, or is the Greek word *metanoia* more than that? Broader than that? It's that exercise of turning to God, but is there a better and more applicable way to think about it?

And so, I'm also open to the reality that no matter what I say, we're all going to end in different places because we come from different backgrounds. That's okay. We're sinners at church.

So, I want to start with the basic understanding and the basic story of repentance that we've talked about in the Bible, and then go from there. Because I think, within our lives, we should be using it daily, not because we're bad people, but because it's such a useful tool that, daily, we should be engaging in this thing called repentance.

Because I think it shows us something. There is, again, a function to repentance. Repentance shows the world what's going on within your heart.

Right? The act of repenting, you have to be humble. The act of repenting, you have to be analyzing where you are within. The act of repenting, you have to be open to the fact that what you were once doing was not quite right.

It shows the world that you are capable of doing something different, repenting.

We have the classic definition or exercise around repentance that's in Luke 18, and it's the story about the Pharisee and the tax collector. In that story, they first talk about the tax collector, who, at that point in time, was the outcast of the world.

Right? The tax collector would be similar to if the IRS came knocking at your door and they didn't take no for an answer. They just took what was there that day. You couldn't say, "I'll put it on a payment plan." You couldn't say, "I'll see you tomorrow."

So, this tax collector comes into the temple to pray, understanding their job and understanding what they've done to the world.

They set this up in the story in Luke 18, as they come in, and they are humble. They are sorrowful. It says they beat themselves on their chest, showing that they know they are unworthy to be there. And because of the position of their heart and their desire to change, they are now justified.

Then, they contrast this story with the story of the Pharisee.

The Pharisee is praying as if they have it all figured out.

"Lord, I thank you that I'm not like them. I thank you that I know what to wear when I go to the temple. I thank you, God, that I can keep the commandments."

Right? They've got it all figured out.

And Jesus said, "This is how not to pray and how not to be."

What does it show you about their heart? It's kind of growing cold.

You're doing things, but your heart is now cold.

So today, I want to encourage you if you are acting like the tax collector as you go to God. And I want to challenge you, and push you just a minute, if you've been acting like the Pharisee.

Because the Pharisee is like that kid who has done something wrong, and their parent comes in and catches them. Then the parent says, "Say you're sorry." And the kid says, "I'm sorry."

They kind of cross their arms. They mutter something. They kind of pout.

And then the parent says, "Say you're sorry, or I'm gonna get the belt."

"I'm sorry."

We don't do belts here anymore, for those of you online.

And then, if you had an old-school mother, she would say, "Say it like you mean it."

Repentance is saying it like you mean it.

Right? So that's the context around this that we want to build on.

But I want to use the story of the prodigal son.

So, we're going to turn to Luke 15. We're going to read verses 11 through 19, and it reads like this:

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger son said to him, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided the property between them.

After a few days, the younger son got everything together and journeyed to a distant country, where he squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent all he had, a severe famine swept through the country, and he began to be in need.

So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. He longed to fill his belly with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one would give him a thing.

Finally, he came to his senses and said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have plenty of food, but here I am, starving to death!

I will get up and go back to my father and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.""

The reading of the Word.

So, the Webster's definition of repentance is to view or to think of an action or an omission, sorry, a deep, deep regret or remorse. It is kind of a feeling of, "What have I gotten myself into?" Right? What have I gotten myself into?

What's going on here? You have taken a moment to pause. Repentance has both a definition and a function. The definition is about what is going on internally. You have slowed yourself down enough to think about where you are, and you are acknowledging, "I don't like this, and I have something I can do about this. I need to try to do something different."

That is where repentance starts, slowing down, stopping, and thinking about what is going on in your life. Do you like it? That is the beginning. And just so you will not feel bad about yourself for doing this, the Almighty God has repented. The Almighty God repented.

Some of you might think, "God? God is perfect." Yes, but God is also our example. In Genesis 6, there is a story where God talks about His great creation, the earth.

Starting in verse 5 of chapter 6, it says:

"The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great upon the earth, and every inclination of the thought of his heart was altogether evil all the time. And the Lord regretted that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the Lord said, 'I will blot out man, whom I have created, from the face of the earth, every man, every beast, every crawling creature, and every bird of the air, for I am grieved."

He sounds pretty mad. There was something that God saw that made Him say, "I have had enough of you all." But here we all are. We are still here. That is because of chapter 9.

From chapters 6 through 9, we see the story of Noah and the ark. We reach the point where a new covenant is made, and when we see the rainbow in the sky, we know that the covenant is still in place. God repented.

So unless you think you have greater control of yourself and the things around you than God does, repentance is a part of your life. It just is.

Why? Because repentance has a function.

Am I humble enough to acknowledge when things go wrong? Am I sensitive enough? Am I caring enough? Is my heart in the right place?

That is what the world sees. Repentance, in definition, is what I am doing internally. The function is to show the world that, no matter how hard you try, there is still more.

Man, let's go further.

We have this younger son going to his father, asking for an inheritance. We can imagine that this son's life was prosperous. How do we know? Because there is an inheritance to give. He has lived a life of prosperity, there is an inheritance, there are servants. As far as he knows, this is just how things are.

Maybe, because he was the younger son, he had never seen his father suffer, struggle, or strive. Because he is the younger son, it has always been this way. "I mean, I got an inheritance. My granddad was this way, and life is good. So while I am young, let me go and enjoy this inheritance that my father has given to me freely while I am young."

Okay. This father was fairly generous and said, "Alright, come on. I will give you your inheritance."

Now, the son has the inheritance. This is just step one, securing the bag. Now he is about to deploy the bag. He leaves his father's house, goes to a faraway land, and plans to party. He is going to have a good time. This is what he knows how to do.

But at some point, like all of us, life starts life-ing. There is no escape for any of us. Life started life-ing, and there was a famine in the land. The son did not really have the skills to handle life when life got tough. He had never experienced struggle before, so he could not maintain the lifestyle he had always known. The lifestyle evaporated. It was gone.

Instead of immediately going home and getting things back together, like many of us would not do, he decided, "First, I will go from ruler to ruled. I will hire myself out, and I will work." Then, the famine continued. Because of the famine, he got paid less. Times got tougher, and there was no one to help him. No one would give him anything.

He reached the point where he was willing to go from being a ruler to eating what hogs would eat.

Now, I know most of you all are city folk. My grandparents and my parents grew up on a farm. Every summer, we would go down to the farm in Kentucky, Georgia, good luck finding that on a map. From time to time, I would slop the hogs. It was disgusting.

Sorry to the rest of my family, but there is no way. Sitting here today, there is no way. But that is because I am fed.

So, how bad does it have to get? How far do you have to fall? Do you go from eating like a ruler to saying, "You know what? Bring me the slop."

Thankfully, at some point, things got so tough that the pride fell away. He analyzed his situation and decided, "I don't like this. I am about to do something different."

For him, he had all these options earlier. He could have immediately gone home. But it took a dire situation for repentance to set in.

And the prodigal son is not the only one who does this.

Look at Samson. He loved Delilah and did all kinds of silly things. He was put in servitude to his enemies, and then things got so bad that he finally called out to God and said, "God, strengthen me one more time."

Look at David. David was always messing up. I will just tell you about one instance. He was the king. He had his pick of the litter when it came to wives. Yet, he took Uriah's wife while Uriah was out fighting a battle for him. Nathan had to come and chastise him. Fortunately, after the threat of losing a member of his family, he repented.

Look at Esther. When she was asked to help save the children of Israel, she initially refused because of her position and comfort in the temple. It took Mordecai to convince her:

"Hey, you know, after they get us, they are going to get you, right? Hey, you know, hate hates. It is eventually going to come up the chain and get you, right?"

She said, "Okay, if I perish for telling this story, I perish. But I am going to see the King."

And then, there is Nebuchadnezzar. If you have kids, get *Veggie Tales*. They will tell you about Nebuchadnezzar, how he went from worshiping idols to finally worshiping God and saying, "Blessed be the name of the Lord of Shadrach, Meshach, and a bad Negro."

For the Black folks, you know I couldn't resist.

But it took dire situations. So if it takes that for you to get to a point of repentance, you are in good company. There is nothing new. I do not discourage you from doing it because sometimes it just has to happen for you to be convinced within yourself.

One thing I wish the Bible did more of is show what happens after repentance. What happens after the pressure is off? What happens once restoration comes?

Because repentance is sometimes just a cry for relief from pain. It is not always a cry for change. That is where the challenge sits.

What I challenge you to do is to make your change in direction a complete break from the past, never return to the slop. Never return to being ruled.

God has positioned you to be the ruler and the influencer. Take your position once you are restored, and maintain it.

I ask myself these types of questions because it troubles me to see some of the things that are going on in our current life. It troubles me, and for this reason, I've been watching a lot of docuseries lately, just about the history of the United States, our founding documents, and the great challenges we have gone through over time.

I won't go through the whole docuseries because it's a lot, but I enjoyed it. It gives me insight into things like how the United States responded during World War II. If you're a historian, don't just take my word for it, go watch the same docuseries, and then we can talk from there.

One thing it highlights is how, before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the nation had a mindset of, "Hey, this isn't our fight. We shouldn't get involved. Let them do their thing." But once Pearl Harbor was bombed, there was only one direction to go. Everyone, as much as they could, did what they could to protect the nation from outside forces.

Millions of people went off to fight. Others worked in factories. People bought war bonds, whatever they could do, they did, for a unified purpose.

Now, most of you who are 25 years old or older, probably 30 or older, you remember where you were on September 11, 2001. You remember that morning. And whether the people in power were ones you supported or not, there was probably a moment when you thought, "Oh no. Oh no."

But we didn't just sit there in shock. We unified. There was one purpose, one direction for what needed to happen. It was clear what was true and what we were going to do, immediately, that day, and in the weeks that followed.

I'm getting concerned because we seem to be drifting away from that ability to unify, even in a moment of crisis.

If we were the sun, did we go from being the ruler to the ruled? Do we have to go from being the ruled to working in the slot? And will we eventually have to go from working in the slot to eating the slop before we finally unify?

What is at the foundation of our ability to come together as a nation? A humbleness of heart. The willingness to admit that what I think today may be wrong. The understanding that I may not have all the right information and that I need to slow down and analyze what's happening around me.

Some of you may ask, "What does that have to do with me and my repentance?"

I wonder if the hardness of heart we see collectively as a nation, the inability to unite even in a crisis, is a reflection of us as individuals.

As Christians, has my heart become so hard that the world can't help but be hard? Have I become so stubborn that the world can't help but be stubborn? Have I become so arrogant that the world has no choice but to be arrogant? Because the world is a reflection of me.

Let that sink in for a moment.

My friends reflect me. So, what I allow matters. There are certain things I can't allow. If you've spent time with me, you know this. If you go to breakfast with me, you'll start to notice, there are certain things you just won't say about certain demographics. Not around me.

And if you do? You won't be around me for long. Because either one of us has to change.

It's not because I know I'm right. It's because, for us to truly be friends, for us to truly be a community, we have to have communication.

And the moment we don't? That means one of us, or both of us, has become so stubborn that we can no longer learn. That we can no longer turn. That we can no longer repent. That we can no longer do an internal analysis.

This is the world we see.

So, my challenge to you, my friends: We've let this world kind of do its thing for some time now, and we're seeing the results. A natural disaster, wildfires, a global pandemic, whatever it is, we can't even agree on what is true.

We've let this experiment go on long enough.

We need to call ourselves and each other, our friends, our communities, to truth. And we need to seek that truth.

You need to do the things with your friends that only you and your friends can do, and be honest about it.

If you just don't like some people, say it. Your friend can handle it. Say it, because then your friend can help you. But first, you have to analyze yourself. Who am I?

Why?

Because I personally find it hard to believe that we have a Constitution with a preamble that says we are in search of a more perfect union, and yet every chance we get, we break apart.

I find it hard to understand how we have a Constitution that says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all are created equal," and we know that ain't true, right?

Even if you take race out of it, there was a term an Italian friend once shared with me (and hopefully, my other Italian friends won't be mad at me for saying this). It was a derogatory term. And there weren't even Black people present in that moment.

Our hearts always seem to be breaking and separating.

And then, at the base of the Statue of Liberty, our symbol to the world since 1886, there's an inscription. It says:

"Give me your tired, your poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

Not the "good" people. Not the elite people. Those with a desire to breathe free.

Is that what we're doing?

There's a tradition within the Church, especially in the Old Testament, where the prophets would come and speak, not only about being personally good, but about the responsibility of the nation.

In that tradition, I hope that Cornerstone will be like the old prophets.

We want you, individually, to live your best life. But when your time comes to speak the truth, I hope you will do it, no matter the situation, no matter how powerful the person in front of you may seem.

Do not cower to power. Because greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world.

I challenge you to see repentance as something you do daily, not just for your own personal growth (though that's where it starts), but because the world is watching.

Show the world what it truly means to be a follower of Jesus Christ and a lover of God, the Creator of the universe.

Amen.